



Representative
Ruth Kagi

Keeping in Touch

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The 2004 Legislative Session Wrap-up

Dear Friends,

First, let me say that it is an honor and a privilege to serve as your State Representative in the Legislature. I have come to rely on many of you as a source of ideas, knowledgeable opinions, and thoughtful feedback on issues before us for consideration. Constituents helped me keep focused on issues important to the 32nd District during the short but extremely intense sixty-day session that just ended.

I would like to thank all of you who responded to my pre-session survey by mailing your answers or responding online. I was happy to be the first legislator in Washington to offer an online survey regarding legislative issues. This provides one more way for citizens to stay in touch and let me know your opinions. The results were very interesting. For example:

- 82% of you support better training and retraining for workers.
- 77% support tax incentives to help companies create family-wage jobs.
- 71% support letting voters decide if school levies should pass with a simple majority vote.
- 68% oppose using state funds for charter schools.
- 70% support stricter enforcement of air quality standards.

Your guidance played an important role in my consideration of legislation this session, and I greatly appreciate it.

In the 2004 session, we had several important successes in the House; unfortunately, in some cases we faced setbacks in the Senate. Nevertheless, the legislature made significant progress on several education issues and on legislation to help stimulate our economy and help provide jobs, as outlined in this newsletter.

Over the next two months, I will be convening hearings of the Children and Family Services Committee around the state to learn from parents, child care workers and teachers regarding their concerns and suggestions to strengthen early childhood education. I hope you will contact me this summer and fall with your questions and comments, about this or any other issue.

Sincerely,

Ruth Kagi



Our Commitment to Students

There's a lot of talk about improving the business climate in our state, but jobs won't matter unless we have an education system that graduates students prepared to take those jobs. Businesses continue to tell the legislature that the quality of the workforce is a critical consideration in their decisions to site new facilities or expand existing ones. Washington must provide greater access and funding for both K-12 and higher education to ensure that new business development and innovation continue to generate economic growth in the future. I continue to strongly support increasing investments and making improvements to our public education system.

Some of the key pieces of legislation that passed this year will help schools and students achieve the level of education necessary to compete and succeed in a global economy.

We accomplished a number of important reforms for K-12 education this year, including a change in the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) test that will allow students to retake the test up to four times and bank scores for sections they have passed. An alternative certification process will also be available for students who have become proficient but are not able to successfully take tests.

Another bill assures that school districts that are successful at raising student achievement on test scores won't lose their Learning Assistance Program (LAP) funding as they do



now. Under a new formula, achievement will be rewarded while struggling districts will still receive the targeted funding and technical assistance they need.

With the continuing tight revenue picture, the legislature was not able to make needed increases in K-12 funding, but we did pass a bill giving school districts authority to collect the full amount of levies approved by their own voters. By allowing them to fully utilize their levy funding base, schools will receive more of the money already authorized by the voters.



By a narrow margin, the Legislature also passed a bill that will allow the formation of 45 charter schools over the next six years. I agreed with the 68% of you who said state tax dollars should not be spent for charter schools and voted against this bill. However, the legislation that passed contains strong accountability measures and I am hopeful that we will be able to avoid some of the pitfalls other states have experienced in the implementation of charter schools. Funding was also appropriated for evaluating the performance of charter schools.

Higher Education

As most of you are aware, higher education has experienced deep cuts over the past two years as the legislature struggled to balance the budget with falling revenues. Enrollment pressure is only going to increase in the coming years. In 2008 Washington will have the largest high school graduating class in history and it is estimated that by 2010 we will need funding and space for an additional 30,000 full time higher education students.



Given our resource constraints, we were only able to make small steps forward this year, including:

- \$17.5 million to pay for 3,000 more full-time enrollment slots for students, including nearly 900 in "high-demand" fields like nursing, computer science and biotech.
- \$7 million in new financial aid funding for students from low and middle income families, including \$2.3 million for Promise Scholarships.
- \$117 million in capital budget funding for improvements to higher education facilities.



32nd Legislative District



Children's Issues in the Legislature

As Chair of the Children and Family Services Committee, I devoted most of my attention to issues affecting children in this state and was pleased with the progress we made.

Through a combination of policy decisions and funding priorities, House Democrats were successful in making positive changes that will affect the lives of vulnerable children and struggling families all across the state.

Recognizing the importance of a healthy body as well as a healthy mind, the budget funded one of my major priorities, the 2004 Act for Hungry Families. This legislation will make school lunches available across the state to low-income kids, and will provide food stamp assistance for needy families coming off of welfare assistance. While this legislation won't make any headlines, it will make a huge difference in the lives of many struggling children and families. In a state with one of the highest per capita income levels, Washington ranks a dismal fifth highest in hunger. How can we expect our children to succeed if they can't focus on their schoolwork because they are hungry?

I also pushed to include \$1 million in the final budget for transition programs for students with developmental disabilities who are graduating from high school. Getting through the school system is just one challenge these individuals face.

They and their families are often in need of assistance finding and keeping a job in a positive workplace. I was very pleased that three of my bills to improve services to children passed this session.



- HB 2364 prohibits discrimination against foster parents when purchasing homeowner's insurance,
- SHB 3083 provides legal immunity for any person who cooperates with a DSHS investigation of child abuse or neglect, and
- 2SHB 3085 requires the Department of Social and Health Services to develop strategies for early and meaningful family involvement in child welfare cases, including family decision meetings.

Finally, with the support of several foundations and private non-profit agencies, I sponsored a bill this session to create a Homeless Families Fund. The goal of the fund is to partner public and private resources for core services needed by families transitioning out of homelessness. Although the bill did not pass, we were able to secure \$2 million in the budget to begin work on creation of a sustaining fund to provide these services.



**Rep. Kagi chairing the
Children & Family
Services Committee.**

Children's Health

Washington's health care system has been severely impacted by rising costs and budget cuts in recent years as low-income families, employers of low-wage workers, and health insurers and providers looked to the state for a lifeline. One of the most controversial bills passed by the legislature last year imposed premiums on health care insurance for low income children – which would have resulted in at least 20,000 children losing insurance.



I worked to restore those cuts this year, and with my colleagues in the House Democratic Caucus, was successful in eliminating premiums for kids in families earning up to 150% of poverty level. We also successfully blocked efforts by the Senate to require co-pays for all participating families, even those far below the federal poverty level.

Other Health Care issues...

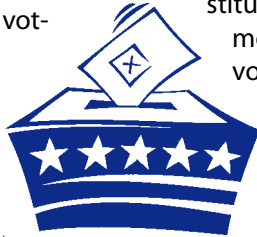
Health care is becoming unaffordable and inaccessible to more and more people. The state budget provides some help to provide access:

- hospitals and clinics will receive nearly \$20 million in new funding so they can continue to serve those with no medical coverage;
- nursing facilities will be reimbursed at a higher rate;
- a new "bare bones" insurance benefit package was authorized by the legislature which will allow insurance companies to offer basic health insurance to small businesses at a lower cost;
- \$2 million in education loans and grants will be provided to students entering the health profession.

The State Primary

One of the most important issues the legislature addressed this year was the primary. The Court of Appeals held that our state's blanket primary was unconstitutional. Two major alternatives were considered: a "top 2" system, in which the two candidates receiving the most votes in the primary move on to the final ballot, and the "Montana" primary, which requires voters to select a ballot for one party when they vote in the primary. This selection would remain private and would not be shared with the parties. Under the "Montana" option, the winner from each main party would be on the final ballot, as well as third party candidates nominated through their own nominating process.

Although I heard from many constituents who wanted a primary closest to the blanket primary, the "top 2" system would eliminate third party candidates from our final election choices, and also would sometimes present voters with no choice between parties. For example, eight years ago, Gary Locke and Norm Rice would have



been the only candidates on the November ballot. I think many Republicans would have felt disenfranchised and angry that they couldn't vote for someone from their own party for governor.

After looking at this issue from many angles, and hearing from many constituents, I concluded that it was most important to insure that voters have a choice between candidates from different parties, including third parties, on the final ballot.

I am not proud of the legislature's action on this bill. We passed the "top 2" with an amendment that allowed the state to implement the Montana system if the political parties successfully challenged the "top 2" in court. The Governor vetoed the "top 2" portion of the bill, leaving us with the Montana. There are already lawsuits being filed challenging his veto. With no clear direction from the legislature, I am very concerned that we might end up with no primary in September – and a lot of chaos.

Staying in Touch

As always, I value your thoughts and concerns on these and any other issues. Please feel free to contact me with any questions or comments; you can find my contact information on the front page of this newsletter. Thank you again for giving me the opportunity to represent you in Olympia.